TEMPORALITIES OF MODERNISM

edited by
Carmen Borbély, Erika Mihálycsa, Petronia Petrar

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THE FLUX OF BECOMING AND THE DREAM OF PERMANENCE IN A REFLECTION BY VIRGINIA WOOLF

And moving through a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.
There she sees the highway near
Winding down to Camelot […]
Alfred Tennyson, *The Lady of Shalott*

Presumably conceived in 1927 and first published in 1929, Virginia Woolf's short story "The Lady in the Looking-glass: A Reflection" describes an attempt to grasp an unempirical reality unattainable though sensory perception. It is through visual impressions and contemplation, in fact, that a mysterious observer, while settled in "the depths of the sofa" of Isabella Tyson's drawing-room,[1] proposes to investigate the most hidden and elusive aspects of the mistress of the house's true self. It is not clear whether this observer is also the speaker since a salient stylistic trait of the short story is the consistent use of the gender-neutral, indefinite pronoun "one" (as in "one was tired of the things that [Isabella] talked about at dinner").[2] Monika Fludernik has already noted that the use of "one" seems to disguise any subjective consideration behind a sort of general consensus, a projection of "what everybody else is

1 Virginia Woolf, "The Lady in the Looking-glass: A Reflection," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 160 (1929): 46.
2 Ibid., 48.

thinking."[3]. Even more importantly, the indefinite pronoun prevents identifying the narrator's position in relation to the story-world, casting doubt on the narrative situation as a whole.

The unidentifiable visitor "could not help looking, that summer afternoon, in the long glass that hung outside in the hall."[4] Thus, the source of most information about Isabella and her house is the looking-glass, which not only exerts an irresistible attraction on the observer's gaze, but also restricts their vision like a window-frame or a screen. Through this limited viewpoint, the observer proposes to "fix one's mind upon [Isabella]," "fasten her down" and "prize her open" in search for the "truth," that is, "her profounder state of being."[5] After having eluded close inspection by moving about in the garden, Isabella approaches the mirror, and her real self is suddenly disclosed:

> She stopped dead. She stood by the table. She stood perfectly still. At once the looking-glass began to pour over her a light that seemed to fix her; that seemed like some acid to bite off the unessential and superficial and to leave only the truth. It was an enthralling spectacle. Everything dropped from her […]. Here was the woman herself. She stood naked in that pitiless light. And there was nothing. Isabella was perfectly empty.[6]

As Carmen Concilio remarks, rather than revealing Isabella's identity, the mirror denies it by bringing about a process of transformation which eventually 'kills' the

3 Monika Fludernik, "Pronouns of Address and 'Odd' Third Person Forms: The Mechanics of Involvement in Fiction," in *New Essays in Deixis. Discourse, Narrative, Literature*, edited by Keith Green (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), 105.

4 Woolf, "The Lady," 46.

5 Ibid., 48.

6 Ibid., 49.

object of scrutiny, leaving behind only her "dead," "perfectly still" and lifeless imago.[7] Constraining and violating, the action of the mirror provides an unexpected result for the investigation of "what the truth about Isabella was,"[8] a result that scholars have found "unsatisfactory" and especially "unconvincing"[9] in light of the narrator and/or observer's unreliability. After all, as Renate Brosch notes, by the end of the story we have "learnt to distrust" the narrator's speculations and the observer's impressions, which have already proven wrong before, and "we are disinclined to believe the […] final statement."[10] One might also challenge the idea itself that the story presents a "final statement" or a close: "The Lady in the Looking-glass" remains at least partially unresolved, as suggested by the circular structure that begins and ends with the same

7 Carmen Concilio, "L'isotopia dello sguardo in alcuni racconti di Virginia Woolf," in *La tipografia nel salotto: saggi su Virginia Woolf*, edited by Oriana Palusci (Torino: Tirrenia Stampatori, 1999), 122.

8 Woolf, "The Lady," 47.

9 See R. T. Chapman, "'The Lady in the Looking-Glass:' Modes of Perception in a Short Story by Virginia Woolf," *Modern Fiction Studies* 18/3 (1972): 333 and Shuli Barzilai, "Virginia Woolf's Pursuit of Truth: 'Monday or Tuesday,' 'Moments of Being' and 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass,'" *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 18/3 (1988): 208.

10 Renate Brosch, "The Secret Self. Reading Minds in the Modernist Short Story. Virginia Woolf's 'The Lady in the Looking-glass,'" *REAL* 24 (2008): 209. I am thinking especially of two signals suggesting that both the narrator and the mysterious observer are unreliable in "The Lady in the Looking-glass." At the beginning of the story, after having associated Isabella to "the tremulous convolvulus" (Woolf, "The Lady," 46), the narrator disproves their own claim, suggesting that this simile is hardly appropriate for her (Ibid., 47). Later, the observer has difficulty in recognising the image of the postman reflected in the mirror (Ibid.), an episode that will be discussed below.

sentence, "People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms."[11] In addition, scholars have often related this text to provisional and incomplete forms of writing, such as the sketch or the diary,[12] which are both inherently unfinished and unfinishable.

Triumphantly and ironically frustrating at various levels, "The Lady in the Looking-glass" saturates the reader with a sense of perceptual and cognitive puzzlement. The narrator is confused and confusing, their identity and gender remain mysterious, and they cannot be clearly located in space and time in relation to the events narrated. Equally enigmatic is the presence (or lack of presence) of the observer, an instance that does not necessarily coincide with the narrator. Apparently unwilling or unable to move and change position, the observer does not seek a different angle of vision even when the "gilt rim of the looking-glass" slices and cuts off parts of the scene they wish to analyse.[13] This figure is so elusive that we are led to doubt its physical concreteness: for one thing, Isabella does not seem to acknowledge the presence of a visitor in her house and acts as if she believes herself to be alone.

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11 Woolf, "The Lady," 46, 48. It is not without irony that Woolf played with the various meanings of "reflection" in "The Lady in the Looking-glass." This noun points to the action of the mirror, to the observer's contemplation, and to the circular form of the text, which 'mirrors' itself. The short story abounds in instances of linguistic playfulness, such as using "one" as both an indefinite pronoun and an adjective in the same sentences (Ibid., 47), or turning figurative language into literal language (Ibid., 48). The latter technique is typical of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, a text that Woolf might have had in mind when composing her short story.

12 Julia Briggs, *Reading Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 173; Abbie Garrington, "Reflections on a Cinematic Story," *Journal of the Short Story in English* 50 (2008): http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/694.

13 Woolf, "The Lady," 46.

Moreover, the observer's own reflection in the mirror is never mentioned, as if they were not part of the scene that is otherwise described in detail.

The motionless, unseen, almost phantasmal "one" is both inside and outside the story-world and, even more significantly, is caught between different dimensions of time. There is, in fact, a dimension happening in Isabella's house, where "[n]othing stayed the same for two seconds together;" the dynamic quality of the image is linguistically emphasised by recurrence of the present participle, as in "curtains blowing" and "petals falling."[14] As opposed to Isabella's house, a dimension of time seems to be enclosed in the mirror, where everything becomes fixed and unmovable:

> But, outside, the looking-glass reflected the hall table, the sun-flowers, the garden path so accurately and so fixedly that they seemed held there in their reality unescapably. It was a strange contrast—all changing here, all stillness there. One could not help looking from one to the other. Meanwhile, since all the doors and windows were open in the heat, there was a perpetual sighing and ceasing sound, the voice of the transient and the perishing, it seemed, coming and going like human breath, while in the looking-glass things had ceased to breathe and lay still in the trance of immortality.[15]

The real-life flow of time apparently denies access to deeper knowledge of the world (and of Isabella), because the flux disarranges each image and breaks it down as if it were constantly refracted in a prism. By contrast, the mirror arrests and fixes fugitive sensory impressions, making observation possible. Almost calling to mind a

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.

Parmenidean notion of the imperturbable (ἀτρεμές), reflected images enjoy a temporary state of stable tranquillity which seem to offer the mind the ability to recognise the true nature of things beyond the uncertainty of the changeable world populated by "nocturnal creatures."[16] Isabella's mirror encloses a condition of stasis and suspension, a non-time where, the narrator claims, objects are "granted that stillness and immortality which the looking-glass conferred."[17]

"The Lady in the Looking-glass" has aptly been interpreted not only as a metaphor of artistic and literary creativity[18] (a line of thought that goes at least as far back as Plato's mirror simile), but also as a demonstration of the unknowability of the inner person. While agreeing with these views, I believe that the temporal dimensions represented in the text deserve more careful attention than they have received so far. Woolf's short story can be read as an investigation into the metaphysical question of the reachability of being—and such investigation implies looking into the immovable reality of the eternal, as opposed to the constant flux of becoming of everyday lives. According to Teresa Prudente, the moments of meditation, reflection, and rapture in Woolf's production "always imply a set of radical changes in both the temporal and spatial perception" of the subject.[19] With this in mind, and building upon Umberto Eco's theoretical speculations, I propose looking at "The Lady in the Looking-glass" as a starting

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., 47.

18 See, for instance, Dominic Head, *The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 87-88.

19 Teresa Prudente, *A Specially Tender Piece of Eternity: Virginia Woolf and the Experience of Time* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2009), 3.

point for a broader discussion of the pervasive and varied use of images of mirrors in Woolf's production.

Mirrors as illusions of eternity

Umberto Eco defines mirrors as loci where "perception—thought—self-consciousness—experience with mirrors—semiosis seem to be the points of a rather inextricable knot, the points of a circle where it would be difficult to spot a starting point."[20] Indeed, the perfect, still and closed temporal dimension of Isabella's mirror could be spatially represented through a circle, which has no beginning and no end—incidentally, a concept which fits the structural circularity of the story and the sense of recursivity that presides it. According to Eco, the mirror, together with the circle, is an "absolute icon"[21] and is profoundly connected to the semiotic dream of nouns (proper names in particular) being directly and immediately linked to their referents. As Eco further states, this dream, "[…] just like the semiotic dream of an image having all the properties of the object they refer to […] arises from a sort of *catoptric nostalgia*."[22]

"The Lady in the Looking-glass" expresses a similar semiotic dream because the observer seeks to receive from the mirror an image of Isabella that corresponds to her substantial truth. In addition, an attempt to find a relation between mirror images and words is suggested whenever the narrator ironically reduces the figurative to the literal, abandoning any displacement of meaning involved in the language of indirect representation: "One must put oneself in [Isabella's] shoes. If one took the phrase literally, it was

20 Umberto Eco, "Mirrors," in *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), 203. Original emphasis.

21 Ibid., 212.

22 Ibid., 212, original emphasis.

easy to see the shoes in which she stood, down in the lower garden, at this moment. They were very narrow and long and fashionable—they were made of the softest and most flexible leather."[23]

In Woolf's production, the mirror theme is often accompanied by the catoptric dream of language reflecting its object in a direct way. For instance, in *Between the Acts* (1941), Isa is sitting at a dressing table musing on her platonic relationship with a local married man when she realises that she cannot find the right word to describe her sensations. It is in the mirror that she starts searching for such word:

> She returned to her eyes in the looking-glass. "In love," she must be; since the presence of his body in the room last night could so affect her; since the words he said, handing her a teacup, handing her a tennis racquet, could so attach themselves to a certain spot in her; and thus lie between them like a wire, tingling, tangling, vibrating—she groped, in the depths of the looking-glass, for a word to fit the infinitely quick vibrations of the aeroplane propeller that she had seen once at dawn at Croydon. Faster, faster, faster, it whizzed, whirred, buzzed, till all the flails became one flail and up soared the plane away and away.[24]

Isa never finds the word that she is looking for, but, as Karen Susan Jacobs remarks, she shows "her preference for the visual evidence of the looking glass" and reconfigures language "imagistically," adopting a physical rather than linguistic frame of reference.[25] Since mirrors "name"

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23 Woolf, "The Lady," 48.

24 Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 14-15.

25 Karen Susan Jacobs, *Engendering the Gaze: Modernist Fictions of the Viewing Subject* PhD Diss. (Berkeley: University

only the specific object standing in front of them, which Eco defines as their "image *referent,*"[26] in Woolf's texts they also inspire (unfulfilled) dreams of identifying specific, unique referents in discourse.

"The Lady in the Looking-glass" seems to combine a desire of unequivocal correspondence between thought and expression with an aspiration to grasp the completeness and wholeness of the self when "drawn in and arranged and composed and made part of [a] picture"[27]—in other words, in a state of permanence that is removed from the fragmentation of everyday life and disengaged from the flow of becoming. The unifying power of reflected images seems to offer privileged access to what Prudente defines as "a different and meaningful dimension,"[28] as is the case with *Mrs Dalloway*:

> Clarissa (crossing to the dressing-table) plunged into the very heart of the moment, transfixed it, there—[…] seeing the glass, the dressing-table, and all the bottles afresh, collecting the whole of her at one point (as she looked into the glass), seeing the delicate pink face of the woman who was that very night to give a party; of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself.[29]

The reflection in the glass captures a fleeting moment of Clarissa's life, transforms her into a static portrait allowing appreciation of "the whole of her," and leads to novel realisation and self-consciousness. The text recreates the perceptual and cognitive synthesis through which

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of California, 1992), 105.

26 Eco, "Mirrors," original emphasis.

27 Woolf, "The Lady," 47.

28 Prudente, *A Specially Tender Piece*, 4.

29 Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*. In *Collected Novels of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Stella McNichol (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 59.

Mrs Dalloway takes in the "new reality"[30] of her mirrored image by describing a process of gradual or deferred recognition. The dynamics of such a process proceed in stages, verbally rendered by a movement from objective, non-specific language to specific and subjective language ("the woman […] Clarissa Dalloway […] herself").

Similarly, in "The Lady in the Looking-glass," the observer interprets a mirrored image in successive phases. The passage configures the dynamism of perceptual experience, conceived as a merging of interior and exterior concurrences:

> A large black form loomed into the looking-glass; blotted out everything, strewed the table with a packet of marble tablets veined with pink and grey, and was gone. But the picture was entirely altered. For the moment it was unrecognisable and irrational and entirely out of focus. One could not relate these tablets to any human purpose. And then by degrees some logical process set to work on them and began ordering and arranging them and bringing them into the fold of common experience. One realised at last that they were merely letters. The man had brought the post.[31]

Here, the delay between the registering of sensory impressions and their interpretation is especially pronounced. Perception progresses from a new entity, which has not yet been clearly identified or fully focused upon ("a large black form," "marble tablets"), to a rendering of that same object as 'given' in a particular frame after it has been correctly identified or named through a "logical process." In fact, the objects of perception are re-organised in the

30 Ibid., 47.
31 Woolf, "The Lady," 47.

observer's mind through a conceptual activity involving what might be called, in Kantian terms, *a priori* concepts.

The narrator eschews any responsibility for the moment of incomprehension by stating that "the picture," rather than their perception of it, "was entirely altered;" in so doing, they suggest that the images reflected in the mirror can be unreliable. The postman episode, therefore, introduces a question concerning the ability of mirrors to distort reality and produce illusions. Woolf seems to rely on the traditional metaphorical ambiguity of mirrors: as Paola Splendore remarks, they can be either a symbol of perfect and unaltered reproduction of reality or its opposite, a source of bewitchment and deception.[32] Angela, the protagonist of "A Woman's College from Outside" (1920), is the victim of such deception as, while looking in a square mirror, she finds that

> [t]he whole of her was perfectly delineated—perhaps the soul. For the glass held up an untrembling image—white and gold, red slippers, pale hair with blue stones in it, and never a ripple or shadow to break the smooth kiss of Angela and her reflection in the glass, as if she were glad to be Angela. […] Strange indeed to have this visible proof of the rightness of things; this lily floating flawless upon Time's pool, fearless, as if this were sufficient—this reflection. Which meditation she betrayed by turning, and the mirror held nothing at all, or only the brass bedstead, and she, running here and there, patting, and darting, became like a woman in a house, and changed again.[33]

32 Paola Splendore, "Lo specchio vuoto e lo specchio infranto. Riflessi del reale nell'opera di Virginia Woolf," *Anglistica* 29/3 (1986): 127.

33 Virginia Woolf, "A Woman's College from Outside," in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Susan Dick (San Diego: Harcourt, 1985), 139.

The moment of permanence and wholeness is just illusory, and the timeless perfection of Angela's reflection is but fleeting: both time and the mirror become "a pool," a surface which is inherently changeable and anamorphic—an idea I will return to shortly.

If some mirrors are especially conceived to generate false impressions, all of them reproduce the surrounding world only in appearance, producing a reflected image that does not actually exist. Thus, the time dimension of "stillness" and "immortality"[34] contained in Angela's and Isabella's looking glasses is just a virtual sign, an illusion of eternity where the fragmented, disordered real world is momentarily "arranged and composed,"[35] or given a factitious order and unity.

The ability to produce optical artifice implied in the virtuality of the mirror is compared by Eco to a sort of theatrical performance because mirrors, he says, "might create a true semiosic situation, a tale, a fiction, a doxastic concoction."[36] In this sense, reflecting surfaces are closely connected to artistic production and fictional telling, as in "The Lady in the Looking-glass," where the mirror becomes a metafictional device. Annalisa Federici writes: "as [it] arranges the various scenes by determining what to include in its own frame, it also parallels the delimiting frame of the short story itself, since what the mirror does not capture the narrative excludes."[37] More specifically, the mirror, its frame, and its function in the story remind us of Woolf's description of moments of being in "A Sketch of the Past" (1939), where they are said to "cut out"

34 Woolf, "The Lady," 46.

35 Ibid., 47.

36 Eco, "Mirrors," 220.

37 Annalisa Federici, "'To Snap Us as We Are:' The Implied Camera in Virginia Woolf's 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection,'" *Annali di Ca' Foscari, Serie occidentale* 49 (2015): 170.

a scene and leave "a circle" of it available for thought,[38] capturing an elusive, passing moment in a seemingly perfect and eternal image.

Mirrors as instances of mutability

For Woolf, the uncertainty arising from mirrors depends especially on the duplicitous nature of the act of mirroring, which brings about similarity and difference with reality at the same time. Reflecting surfaces promise absolute truth but can create deceptive situations: although the reflected image upholds the principle of verisimilitude, distortion and inversion are part of its nature. Transfiguration, in fact, is a characteristic of mirroring and does not imply that the mirror is lying.[39]

Under such conditions, it might be impossible to distinguish distorted or transfigured images from 'real' ones, as suggested in the short story "The New Dress" (1925). Because of the looking-glass hung in the room where a party is held, Mabel has a sudden realisation that her outfit is inappropriate, "hideous,"[40] and experiences deep "humiliation and agony and self-loathing."[41] She feels guilty because, previously, in the dressmaker's workroom, another mirror returned a positive image of her, the semblance of "a beautiful woman,"[42] so she dwelled upon "an orgy of

38 Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," in *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Jeanne Schulkind (Sussex: Chatto and Windus for Sussex University Press, 1976), 79.

39 Eco, "Mirrors," 216-217.

40 Virginia Woolf, "The New Dress," in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Susan Dick (San Diego: Harcourt, 1985), 164.

41 Ibid., 168.

42 Ibid., 166.

self-love, which deserved to be chastised."[43] Indeed, Mabel believes that other partygoers "would like her to drown" like Narcissus in the "dreadfully showing-up blue pool" of the reflecting glass.[44] Even if she seems convinced that "*This* was true, this drawing-room, this self, and the other false,"[45] there remains an open question about which of Mabel's reflected selves is the "true" one. As in Angela's case, both reflections could be true at different moments and in different dimensions of time: when at the dressmaker's, Mabel caught "just for a second" a transfixed revelation of "the core of herself, the soul of herself" as an image of timeless beauty. Later, "the whole thing had vanished,"[46] time resumed its flow and her previous appearance altered itself due to the instability or discontinuity of selfhood in the ever-moving world. Mirrors, thus, once again deny that the sense of sight may be able to fix a stable and reliable image of reality outside the flux of becoming.

In addition, at the party Mabel sees herself through the gaze of the other, which is perceived as violent, judgmental, and alienating. The destructive effects of a spying or maliciously observing eye associated with the mirror is a central preoccupation also in "The Lady in the Looking-glass," where the narrator warns, "People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms any more than they should leave open cheque books or letters confessing some hideous crime."[47] Since mirrors can disclose one's innermost secrets, their potential danger becomes actual only in the presence of the inquisitive gaze of the other, when the reflection's intrusive power can be used as an instrument of control and censorship. It is, in fact, the scrutiny

43 Ibid., 165.
44 Ibid., 167-168.
45 Ibid., 166; original emphasis.
46 Ibid., 166.
47 Woolf, "The Lady," 46.

of a mysterious observer and of some fashionable guests at a party that, after reducing Isabella and Mabel to passive objects of examination, determines their dissolution and demise. In both texts, moreover, mentions of "hideous crime[s]"[48] and "foolish" actions[49] suggest that mirrors are closely associated with fault and guilt.

In the autobiographical "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf relates how shame, along with "[a] strong feeling of guilt" seemed "naturally attached" to looking at her own reflection in the mirror when she was a little girl.[50] This recollection, variously interpreted through the lens of Woolf's life history, sheds new light on a recurring theme of her fictional production, a constant desire of self-love perceived as either forbidden or hard to fulfil. As emerges from the references to pools and drowning in the descriptions of both Angela and Mabel's experience with the deceitfulness of mirrors, the thematic field of self-love is rich in allusions to the myth of Narcissus, which Woolf explores by intertwining its different traditions. "A Woman's College from Outside" and "The Dress" seem to draw inspiration chiefly from Ficino's and Plotinus' versions of the myth; deeply influenced by Plato, Ficino and Plotinus see Narcissus as an anti-tragic symbol of self-love, who misguidedly pursues the material beauty of the body rather than the Idea, the essence of beauty itself, which is the

48 Ibid.

49 Woolf, "The New Dress," 165.

50 Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," 68. Woolf also talked about the danger she perceived in the mirror in a sort of dream, or vision: "I dreamt that I was looking in a glass when a horrible face—the face of an animal—suddenly showed over my shoulder. I cannot be sure if this was a dream, or if it happened. Was I looking in the glass one day when something in the background moved, and seemed to me alive? I cannot be sure. But I have always remembered the other face in the glass, whether it was a dream or a fact, and that it frightened me" (Ibid., 69).

only goodness.[51] On the other hand, "The Lady in the Looking-glass" exploits mainly Ovid's myth of Narcissus in the *Metamorphoses*, an anti-Platonic tale conveying a tragic conception of life, according to which knowledge can merely lead to the awareness that absolute truth does not exist.

Interestingly, even Pausanias's account of the myth is hinted at in Woolf's production. In this version, Narcissus had an identical twin sister; after she died, he started contemplating his own reflection in the water so that he had the impression of looking at her again, in wilful self-deception. As Martin Bergmann notes, Pausanias introduces the theme of Hermaphroditus into that of Narcissus[52] for the young man embodies, or desires to embody both sexes simultaneously. It is not surprising, thus, that the protagonist of Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) entertains a special relationship with mirrors:

> Then laying her pen aside she went into her bedroom, stood in front of her mirror, and arranged her pearls about her neck. [...] What woman would not have kindled to see what Orlando saw then burning in the snow—for all about the looking glass were snowy lawns, and she was like a fire, a burning bush, and the candle flames about her head were silver leaves; or again, the glass was green water, and she a mermaid, slung with pearls, a siren in a cave, singing so that oarsmen leant from their boats and fell down, down to embrace her; so dark,

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51 Incidentally, Ficino re-reads, in the same vein, the Hermetic tradition of Pimander, who reveals to Trismegistus how the immortal man assumed a mortal form after falling in love with his own image reflected in the water; this cosmogony explains why the essence of human beings still contains a sparkle of eternity and immortality.

52 Martin S. Bergmann, "The Legend of Narcissus," *American Imago* 41/4 (1984): 390.

> so bright, so hard, so soft, was she, so astonishingly seductive that it was a thousand pities that there was no one there to put it in plain English.[53]

Like Narcissus, Orlando possesses a wondrous beauty and gives over to the seductive power of the mirror, abandoning her writing-table to contemplate her own image. The fact that no one could "put […] in plain English" Orlando's splendour might be a reference to Echo, the nymph who, according to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, was unable to produce coherent speech and fell in love with Narcissus. The "green water" simile, moreover, emphasises that Orlando's mirror is as fluid as Narcissus's pool, and as such it does not return a unified, static image but a flow of juxtaposed pictures, in which opposite qualities coexist ("so dark, so bright, so hard, so soft").

The instability and precariousness of Orlando's reflection somehow re-enacts Narcissus's tragic experience, that is, the inability to fix his own image in the water, and the impossibility of joining with it to reach the wholeness of his own being. Starting with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, water mirrors have been a symbol of both transformation and anamorphosis as they express a twofold character of time:[54] they offer an illusion of permanence and symbolise the desire of fixing an imperturbable image of reality,

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53 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, edited by Michael H. Whitworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 109.

54 Ovid often copes with the question of time and its different conceptions in *Metamorphoses*; see, for instance, Book XV: "A universe where nothing stays the same, / Sea, sky, wind, earth, and time forever changing—/ Time like a river in its ceaseless motion, / On, on, each speeding hour cannot stand still, / But as waves, thrust by waves, drive waves before them, / So time runs first or follows forever new: / The flying moment gone, what once seemed never / Is now, which vanishes before we say it, / Each disappearing moment in a cycle, / Each loss replaced

yet they consist of a restless and changeable substance. So, while suggesting the idea of eternity, they also represent its opposite, the constant flow of becoming. In Woolf's production, this aporia regarding water mirrors is found, for instance, in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), where similar images convey opposite ideas: dreams are said to persist steadily "[i]n those mirrors, the minds of men," which are "pools of uneasy water."[55] However, later, it is in a "pool of thought" that Lily witnesses the dissolution of "the whole world."[56]

The day after having completed "The Lady in the Looking-glass," Woolf started writing the short story "The Fascination of the Pool" (1929), a title that clearly evokes narcissistic associations. Yet, unexpectedly, the story turns the narcissistic glance outwards, as the pool does not return the image of the (mysterious) narrator, who is gazing in its depths. It shows something different, something other than the reflecting self: the faces of people "who had gone away,"[57] but whose thoughts live on in the water. The sense of optic uncertainty inherent in all mirrors is emphasised in the watery reflection, which is especially deceitful to the human eye: the pool "may have been very deep,"[58] and a "white placard" mirrored on its surface seems to float on it. The "darkness" caused by a "fringe of rushes"[59] calls to mind Ovid's description of the thick

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within the living hour," Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, edited by Horace Gregory (New York: The Viking Press, 1958), 428.

55 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse,* in *Collected Novels of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Stella McNichol (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 278.

56 Ibid., 312.

57 Virginia Woolf, "The Fascination of the Pool," in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Susan Dick (San Diego: Harcourt, 1985), 220.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

grass and vegetation that prevents the sun from shedding light on Narcissus's pool,[60] wrapping it in an obscurity which not only contributes to visual deception, but also hides any sign of passing time.

In "The Fascination of the Pool," once again the pool-mirror becomes a dimension of non-time, where past and present converge: it "held in its waters all kinds of fancies, complaints, confidences, not printed or spoken aloud, but in a liquid state, floating one on top of another, almost disembodied."[61] As if it were a catoptromantic mirror, the pool presents to the observer's eye a sequence of voices and stories from the past, a flux that seems to have no unifying principle and no end:

> One drew closer to the pool and parted the reeds so that one could see deeper, through the reflections, through the faces, through the voices to the bottom. But there under the man who had been to the Exhibition; and the girl who had drowned herself and the boy who had seen the fish; and the voice which cried alas alas! yet there was always something else. There was always another face, another voice. One thought came and covered another.[62]

The "liquid thoughts," in fact, "stick together" and "form recognisable people," but "just for a moment."[63] Each identity, only apparently fixed throughout eternity in the pool, quickly dissolves before the observer's eyes, revealing its instability. In this sense, "The Fascination of the Pool" adds to the interpretation of the other mirrors and reflecting surfaces proposed so far; the story suggests, borrowing Jesse Matz's expression, that for Woolf "people

60 Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, 77.
61 Woolf, "The Fascination," 220.
62 Ibid., 221.
63 Ibid., 220.

are collections of different selves,"[64] entities in a constant state of flux, who vary according to different times and circumstances and "shift and change and [are] seen through in a second."[65]

Reflecting surfaces express a nostalgia, or a disappointed hope of reuniting with an absolute and unchanging ideal of the self. All they seem to offer is a fleeting and narcissistic gratification of self-recognition; however, they also provide a counter to the dangers of self-absorption or sensorial certainty because of their inherent power of anamorphosis and transformation. Characters such as Isabella, Angela, Mabel, and especially Orlando only exist in multiplicity, like the reflections in "The Fascination of the Pool," as they constantly change on a physical, mental, or emotional level; their temporary selves can be captured by the heterochrony of the mirror, but their different beings, just like the different time dimensions they experience, do not amount to any single, conclusive form. In this frame of thought, identity and alterity are impossible to tell apart because the whole structure of reality becomes unstable, as happens with Narcissus: both innocent and guilty, "himself the worshipped and the worshipper,"[66] he wonders: "Am I the lover / Or beloved?."[67]

64 Jesse Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 175.

65 Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, in *Collected Novels of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Stella McNichol (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 358.

66 Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, 77.

67 Ibid., 78.

By summoning enriching new examples, as well as a remarkable depth of aesthetic analyses, *Temporalities of Modernism* succeeds in proving that we are far from being done examining the myriad subtle ways in which modernists have enriched our conception and our experience of time. In its final consideration of the ethics of resistance in which those who produce images of historical trauma engage, the book again opens salutary avenues for a reflection which is more than essential in our own times. This volume will definitely contribute to the welcome current trend toward a more global understanding of the phenomenon of modernism.

Valérie Bénéjam
(Nantes Université/ITEM-CNRS)

The contemporary energies behind *Temporalities of Modernism* are rooted in the turbulence of the modernist age: relativity, irreversibility, duration, fragmentation, contingency, and the looming threat of the apocalyptic future. The volume's transnational and multilingual perspective testifies to the increased relevance of modernist-inspired perceptions of time in the current geopolitical context. The highly relevant collection offers a fresh look at modernism's legacy and points to new directions in modernist studies in the 21st century.

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